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The School Library and the Development of Information Literacy Skills in At-Risk Youth

**Introduction**

As the sheer volume of information grows, our ability to successfully navigate and filter information also needs to grow. Information literacy is about being able to find, manage, evaluate, and communicate information effectively. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, currently adopted by 45 U.S. states), the International Society for Technology in Education’s (ISTE) National Educational Technology Standards (NETS), and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) all include information literacy as a key building block to attaining other educational standards. Unfortunately, information literacy is largely not mandated in American K-12 schools, despite the existence of national standards([AASL, 2007](#_ENREF_1)). While one of the main objectives in any school library media program (LMP) is information literacy, studies on library curriculum are lacking. There are almost no comparative studies regarding K-12 library curricular development ([Catherine Haras, 2008](#_ENREF_3)). Despite the well-documented correlations between poverty and educational achievement, there have been few studies that have examined characteristics of school libraries in schools with high concentrations of poverty compared with schools with low concentrations of poverty ([Shana Pribesh, 2011](#_ENREF_10)). The school library is a critical component in providing access to materials and resources that support the development of information literacy skills for all students and notably, for English Language Learners. Despite the growing Latino population in the U.S., data on Latino information literacy are nascent ([Haras, 2011](#_ENREF_6)). This essay looks at the research that has been done on the role of the school library in the development of information literacy skills for youth that are at-risk because of poverty and cultural barriers.

**Poverty and the Access Gap**

There seems to be a direct correlation between poverty and the school library access gap. The school library access gap refers to the difference in access to a school library media center (LMC) and its resources as experienced between high and low socioeconomic groups. A study by Pribesh, Gavigan, and Dickinson examined the school library access gap in schools in North Carolina and Virginia with varied poverty concentrations. The findings showed that schools with the highest levels of poverty also had the fewest school library resources to draw upon. Those resources included staff, certified teachers and librarians, new materials, and hours the LMC was open.

The Center for Education Statistics report *The Condition of Education 2008* reveals that poverty falls most heavily on black and Hispanic families. The percentage of White children in poor households in 2006 was at 10 percent compared to Black children at 33 percent and Hispanic children at 26 percent. Further, more Black and Hispanic students attended high poverty schools in 2005-2006 than did White students. About 34 percent of Hispanic, 32 percent of Black, and 4 percent of White students attended high poverty schools which are defined as schools having more than 75 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch”([NCES, 2008](#_ENREF_7)). Statistics reveal that in 2007, 13.3 million U.S. children were living in poverty. Children living in poverty are more likely to have low academic achievement, to drop out of school, and have health, behavioral, and emotional problems than children from affluent families. Schools with library media centers have a better chance of narrowing the poverty achievement gap by providing access to important resources like books and technology ([Shana Pribesh, 2011](#_ENREF_10)).

In an extensive ten-year case study conducted at two public libraries in different neighborhoods in Philadelphia, funding and library resources were examined. The author discusses the historical purpose of the public library as an institution that helped to reduce the inequities in society by providing free access to information for all people. She asserts that for many people living in poverty, the public library is the only resource for access to print and other technologies. “Particularly in the poorest neighborhoods, budgets would be slashed, and libraries even threatened with closure. Supposedly saving precious taxpayer dollars, hours of operation would be curtailed, weekends limited, and librarians inevitably asked to do more with less. In essence, access to information for poor families and their children was seen as expendable” ([Susan B. Neuman, 2012, p. 21](#_ENREF_13)). Based on these findings, the library access gap is not limited to school libraries but may also include public libraries. The consequences of the access gap will affect students in high-poverty schools who may fall behind in attaining the information literacy skills to enter the workforce ([Shana Pribesh, 2011, p. 155](#_ENREF_10)).

**A New Job Market**

The information age we live in has created an entirely new skill set that did not exist before the advent of the Internet. Frank Levy and Richard Murnane address the new job market created by computers in their book *The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market*, “today, the prosperity of companies and nations has come to demand high-level human and information capital—knowledge workers—who can mobilize their skills and talents to promote innovation and greater productivity” ([Frank Levy, 2004](#_ENREF_5)). Preparing students for participation in the global economy means teaching them the information and technology literacy skill sets that are the foundation of tomorrow’s jobs. School library media programs with state certified teacher-librarians aim to do just that; their curriculae address the national standards for teaching 21st century learners. However, information literacy is largely not mandated in American K-12 schools, and 25 percent of school library media centers do not have a state-certified librarian on staff. Even more disturbing is the fact that only 35 percent of our nation’s SLMCs include state-certified teacher-librarians ([NCES, 2008](#_ENREF_7)). How can we ignore the need for teacher-librarians when we understand the skill set our students will require to protect the U.S. role in the global economy ([Spring, 2010](#_ENREF_12)).

The future of our young people and of the nation is at risk when states do not include information literacy skills in their curriculum. The problem deepens when we look at the correlation between a lack of information literacy skills being taught and the growing immigrant populations across the U.S. For these groups, information skills are crucial as they are forced to navigate a system where cultural and language barriers threaten to block their education and future. Latinos represented 53 percent of total immigrants arriving in the U.S. in the last decade. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, California has the highest Hispanic or Latino population of any state with 14,013,719 people of Hispanic or Latino origin out of a total population of 37,253,956 ([Census](#_ENREF_4)). However, in California the lack of focus on information literacy skills in public schools threatens student futures. “There is scant evidence that task definition, information-seeking strategies, effective use of information, information synthesis, or source evaluation is formally taught as a part of the California public school curriculum. Unless the state does a better job of educating its young Hispanic population, the majority of its workers will lack the skills to compete in a global economy. Given increased workplace expectations, it makes sense for US school districts to take the long view and make information literacy part of K-12 curriculum”([Haras, 2011, p. 39](#_ENREF_6)).

According to the California Department of Education only 23 percent of the state’s schools have a credentialed library media teacher. The state ranks last in the nation for the ratio of librarians to students (1:5,965). A California study of U.S –educated first-year Latino undergraduates showed that barely three-quarters engaged in some form of research activity during high school. One in four students did not do any research until college. The findings suggest K-12 library use and information literacy development are correlated ([Catherine Haras, 2008](#_ENREF_3)). Contrary to the findings on the school library access gap, another study by Haras revealed that access to technology did not appear to be the issue. She reports that the “opportunity for students to effectively develop higher order information skills in a pedagogical setting seemed to be missing – that is, the chance to iteratively practice doing research. Focus groups revealed many hopeful Latino youth who said they were college bound, yet were lacking the research skills to help them do well in college”([Haras, 2011, p. 39](#_ENREF_6)). Libraries and librarians are important to the K-12 academic “pipeline”. Data from one study showed that community college students who came from California high schools with librarians and library programs were better prepared to do the college research demanded of them and ranked in the top third of their class ([Smalley, 2004](#_ENREF_11)).

**Cultural Gap, Language, & Literacy**

Pedro Noguera discusses the cultural gap experienced by many immigrant Latino youth in his book *The Trouble With Black Boys*. He states that this group of young people often find themselves trapped between the world of their parent’s country and American culture. “Many arrive without having experienced formal education in their countries of origin or literacy in their native Spanish language. Consequently, there is growing evidence that immigrant youth are susceptible to a variety of hardships and pressures that many adults, including their parents, do not fully understand. Through constructing culturally relevant educational policies, programs, and pedagogy, we can assist Latino immigrant youth to avoid the pitfalls that often beset this vulnerable population”([Noguera, 2008, p. 75](#_ENREF_9)).

Sonia Nieto’s *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* outlines the tension she felt growing up as a Puerto Rican in New York City. The tension between the language and culture of her family and the language and culture of the school caused her to feel, “…ashamed of who we were, how we spoke, what we ate, and everything else that was different about us”([Nieto, 1992](#_ENREF_8)) . “For Nieto, the goal of multicultural education should be to bridge the gap between the culture of the family and the culture of the school so that children immigrant and dominated families do not have to suffer the pain and shame that she experienced” ([Spring, 2010, p. 126](#_ENREF_12)).

Denise Agosto points to developing the school library media collection’s multicultural resources as a means of helping these students bridge the cultural gap. Multicultural resources can be a valuable resource in helping English-language learners (ELLs) with the English-language acquisition process. Students learning English as a new language experience great cognitive demands as they are asked to quickly learn both language and content in order to participate fully in the school curriculum ([Sylvia M. Vardell, 2006](#_ENREF_14)). When ELLs are taught to read using texts representing unfamiliar cultural events, images, and concepts, they are faced with the double task of trying to interpret unfamiliar English words while trying to comprehend unfamiliar cultural elements. “Helping students learn English through culturally relevant texts greatly reduces the latter of these two tasks, enabling ELLs to focus directly on the primary task at hand: English-language learning” ([Agosto, 2007, p. 28](#_ENREF_2)).

Reading proficiency and information literacy seem to correlate directly to educational gains. Studies have shown that avid readers have a tendency to know more than their counterparts who read very little. Those who know more will most likely learn more, and learn faster supporting the notion that knowledge begets knowledge ([Willingham, 2003](#_ENREF_15)). In relating findings from her ten-year study of the importance of libraries and literacy in the early education of children, Susan Neuman states that “ this is a stunning finding because it means that children who get off to a fast start in reading are more likely to read more over the years—and this very act of reading develops vocabulary, general knowledge, and information capital. Consequently, children’s earliest experiences with print will establish a trajectory of learning that is reciprocal and exponential in nature— spiraling either upward or downward, carrying profound implications” ([Susan B. Neuman, 2012, p. 23](#_ENREF_13)).

**Conclusion**

Despite the need for our youth to develop strong information literacy and research skills in order to succeed in their educations and their futures, and despite the correlations between school library media programs and student achievements, the school library is still undervalued. In looking at youth that are at-risk because of poverty or face culture and language barriers, the school library provides access to materials and information literacy and research instruction that is invaluable in helping them achieve college-and-career readiness. Making investments in school libraries and state-certified library-teachers will ensure we make provisions for helping our youth acquire the skills called for in the CCSS, ISTE NETS, and AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner.

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